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ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AMONG BUSINESS STUDENTS AND ITS IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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Abstract:

Market demand for employees who are proficient in English language has increased nowadays, hence, many developing countries including Malaysia has put high emphasis on their local university graduates' capabilities to master the foreign language by implementing various methods of cultivating the use of English in the university settings. Hence, the main objective of this study is to investigate the impact of English language proficiency on a student's academic performance in the university. Previous studies conducted in this area simply focuses on either testing the results of language tests or perceptions of students themselves, but none have yet to combine both techniques in investigating the impact, especially in Malaysia. This study utilizes 300 respondents among business students from four (4) public universities in Malaysia. The results of the study suggest that on average the respondents do perceive the importance of being proficient in English in manoeuvring the academic environment in the university. The results also indicate significant effect between students' secondary results (i.e., SPM) and English entrance exam (i.e., MUET) with students' academic performance in the university (i.e., CGPA).

Keywords:

English Proficiency, MUET, Academic Performance, Business Undergraduates, Public Universities

Introduction

According to the EF English Proficiency Index (EPI) which is the world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills, among the 100 country EPI ranking for 2020, Malaysia is ranked 30th indicating moderate proficiency behind other Asian countries such as Philippines ranked-27th, High Proficiency and Singapore ranked-10th, Very High Proficiency (Ang, 2021), thus signifying Malaysian's ability to master the command of English language is still considerably low. Interestingly, the report also highlighted that low proficiency in English or lack of English language skills has been considered a barrier to academic success, entry of employment and workforce accomplishment. The major reason behind this is that high proficiency in spoken and written English is regarded as the principal prerequisite qualification (Rao, 2016) in many higher tertiary institutions and competitive workforce. In an article by Runde and Nealer (2017) highlighted several strategic benefits to English proficiency among others as (i) the language of business, growth and economic prosperity, (ii) the language of education and research and (iii) geostrategic benefits between countries.

Malaysia has long recognised the importance of English and has placed various strategies in the Malaysian education system to improve the standard of its citizen's English language capability. Institutions of higher learning (IHL) in Malaysia emphasized on the teaching of English in its quest to improve English proficiency of its students in line with the national education policy and system provided by the country's policy makers (Arsad et al. 2014). For example, in 2000, the Malaysian Ministry of Education had introduced the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) with the objective of consolidating and enhancing the English language ability of pre-University students so that at the tertiary level these students would be able to communicate with ease in the language. Candidates will be tested on four (4) areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The earlier version of the test classifies candidates according to six (6) bands or level of achievements, from highly proficient users (Band Six) to very limited users (Band One). The new revised 2021 curriculum only have 5 Bands. Later in 2003, another huge step was taken by the Malaysian Ministry of Education by introducing the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English to secondary schools with the idea behind this implementation was to prepare the students enrolling in Science and Mathematics courses at the university level to be more proficient in English. This is mainly because English has been the language of most local university textbooks and the language of instructions in many local universities in Malaysia. Hence, it is safe to assume that where the proficiency in English is lacking in any academic setting, it will lower the academic performance of such students (Aina et al. 2013).

Taking all these factors into consideration, the main objective of this paper is to investigate whether a student's English language proficiency will have an impact on their overall academic performance in a university setting, in particular for students enrolled in Business courses. This is based on the earlier contention made by Runde and Nealer (2017) that English is the language of business, growth and economic prosperity. By being able to identify the factors for poor academic performance among local university students, it is hopeful that corrective actions or interventions can be put into place to help improve the outcome.

Literature Review

Academic Performance

Prior literature concerning factors contributing to academic achievement of students in higher education reveals several factors in multiple dimensions which can be categorized under four (4) categories: academic, psychosocial, cognitive, and demographic (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). All these factors have been extensively explored and examined by previous research. For example, among academic factors, prior academic achievement (e.g., McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; McKenzie, Gow, & Schweitzer, 2004), learning skills and habits (e.g., Abbott-Chapman, Hughes, & Wyld, 1992), learning strategies (i.e., general learning strategies, subject-matter specific strategies) and approaches (e.g., Duff, Boyle, Dunleavy, & Ferguson, 2004; Pokay & Blumenfeld, 1990; Sadler-Smith, 1996; Watkins & Hattie, 1981) were all explored as variables influencing academic performance. Meanwhile from the psychosocial dimension, social integration into the university system, motivation, anxiety, social and emotional support, and psychological health were also identified (e.g., Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978). The cognitive dimension, which includes self-efficacy (e.g., McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001) and an individual's attribution style (e.g., Peterson & Barrett, 1987) were also studied in many empirical studies. Lastly, various demographic features such as gender and age were examined in relation to academic performance in higher education (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010).

English Proficiency

Among factors that contribute to low English speaking among students and one of the primary elements of the students' English language speaking issues found in previous studies was the management in teaching and learning English, which includes the administration of classroom exercises, course syllabus (Jindathai, 2015), poor quality educators (Mosha, 2014; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Soureshjani & Riahipour, 2012) and improper selection of teaching materials (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2014).

In addition to that, psychological factors were also found to contribute to the low proficiency in English among students such as students' hesitance in committing errors Debreli, Kucuk & Demirkan (2015); Tuan & Mai (2015) and one of the major discoveries made by Al-Mahrooqi (2012) was peer discouragement. Peers that mocked upon another peer's exhibition in communicating in English can influence one's learning progress. Besides that, a study by Siti & Melor (2014) had also found that strong teacher-students relationship might influence students' perception of teachers as their inspirational source which later led to the discovery that students' speaking skills were mostly afflicted by their educators. A Malaysian study by Rusli et al. 2018 had confirmed the students' lack of proficiency in speaking are also due to their psychological factors, inefficient of management's role and the influence of teachers' and peers' motivation on theirs.

English Proficiency and Academic Performance

Many research has been conducted in other countries, mainly in the West (e.g., Hill, Storch, & Lynch, 1999; Huong, 2001; Johnson, 1988; Kerstijens & Nery, 2000; Krausz, Schiff, Schiff, & Hise, 2005; Light, Teh-Yuan, & Weinstein-Shr, 1991; Light, Xu, & Mossop, 1987; Staynoff, 1997; Woodrow, 2006) to investigate the relationship between language proficiency and academic performance among different groups of international students in English speaking institutions by utilizing standardized test scores such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign

Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System). While there were a number of studies supporting the positive relationship between language proficiency as measured by TOEFL and IELTS scores and academic achievement as measured by Grade Point Average (GPA), there were also studies implying that TOEFL scores might not be a good predictor for international students' academic success (Krausz et al., 2005; Xu, 1991), implying that English test scores alone is insufficient to measure a student's academic success. Therefore, additional investigations are needed to explore other constructs in measuring English proficiency, as well as other variables that might predict international students' academic success.

From the perspective of different fields of academic performance, various studies can also be found which have tested the effect of English proficiency among different groups of students. For example, descriptive research of a correlation type was conducted by Aina et al. 2013 whereby 120 students were sampled from a college of education in Nigeria and the findings revealed that there is a correlation between proficiency in English language and academic performance of students in science and technical education.

Research Method

Consistent with Martirosyan et. al (2015), an ex-post facto, a non-experimental approach is used in this study to examine the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance of undergraduate students enrolled in a 4-year business programme in four (4) selected Malaysian public universities.

A standardized self-reported questionnaire was developed and utilized to collect the data. In addition to some basic demographic questions, the instrument included items on English language proficiency. Students were asked to rate their English language proficiency using a 4-point Likert scale: 1 (poor), 2 (average), 3 (good), and 4 (excellent). They were also asked to indicate whether they had academic difficulties in understanding English, specifically in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A 4-point Likert-scale was used for these items as well: 1 (always), 2 (often), 3 (sometimes), and 4 (never). The questionnaire also included an item on the MUET result which is used to measure the students' English language proficiency (ELP). Meanwhile, respondents' academic performance was measured by their current Cumulative Grade Average Point (CGPA). In addition, respondents were also asked to indicate how they felt their English language skills affected their academic achievement.

Data Analysis

SPSS statistical software package was utilized to analyse data. Students' academic performance measured by their CGPAs was the outcome (dependent) variable, while self-rated questions about language proficiency and language difficulty, and the number of languages spoken were independent variables. Descriptive statistics of the sample was applied to analyze the data. In addition, multiple regression analysis was also utilized to determine which independent variables were the best predictors of students' academic performance.

Findings

This study was conducted to evaluate the relationship between ELP and academic performance among undergraduate business students of Malaysian's public university. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to get an insight on the characteristics or the background of the sample. A total of 300 responses were received. From this amount, 235 (78%) were female

respondents and 65 (22%) male respondents who participated in this survey. Majority of them, 180 (59%) are 2nd year students, 78 (26%) are 1st year students, followed by 39 (13%) are 3rd year students and the remaining 3 (1%) are final year students.

Overall, 94 percent (281) of our respondents agreed that English is the main medium used by their university lecturers in the classroom. Respondents were also asked in the survey to indicate whether English is used as their first, second, third language or more. Majority of the respondents, representing 85.6 percent (262) indicated that English is their 2nd language, whilst for 31 respondents (10.1 percent), English is their 3rd language and 10 respondents indicated that English is their 1st language.

Descriptive Statistics

Academic Performance

The academic performance in this study is measured using the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), whereby the maximum CGPA recorded is 4.0. In Malaysia, the system of CGPA 4.00 is commonly used in public universities. The average CGPA is 3.59 with a standard deviation of 0.25 and a minimum of 2.35. As shown in Table 1, the frequency distribution showed that 5 students achieved a CGPA of 4.00, 30 percent (90) with a CGPA of between 3.75 to 4.00, 22 percent (67) with a CGPA of between 3.50 to 3.75, 38 percent (114) with a CGPA of between 3.25 to 3.50, 7 percent (21) with a CGPA of between 3.00 to 3.25 and 3 students with a CGPA of below 3.

Table 1: Frequency of CGPA Scores

CGPA	Frequency	Percentage
Below 3.00	3	1
3.00 to 3.25	21	7
3.25 to 3.50	114	38
3.50 to 3.75	67	22
3.75 to 4.00	90	30
4.00	5	2

English Test Proficiency

MUET

Prior to 2021, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) grades the overall results by using 6 bands (i.e. Band 1 as very limited user to Band 6 as highly proficient user). Students are required to take the examination before applying for the admission to any of the public universities in Malaysia. From Table 2, it can be observed that the respondents managed to score between Band 2 to Band 5, whereby close to 21 percent (63) of the respondents scored a Band 2, 48 percent (144) scored a Band 3, 28 percent (84) scored a Band 4 and only 3 percent (9) of our respondents scored a Band 5 in their MUET.

Table 2: Frequency of MUET Band

Band	Frequency	Percentage
2	63	21
3	144	48
4	84	28
5	9	3

SPM

The Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) uses a 10-scale to grade every paper (i.e., grade G as Fail up to grade A+ as Highest Distinction). For the purpose of this study, we reclassified the grades to five (5) major categories to simplify our analysis as presented in Table 3. From the table, 21 percent (63) achieved A+ or A for their English SPM paper, 33 percent (100) scored A- or B+, 28 percent (85) scored B or C+, 7 percent (22) scored C and 10 percent (30) scored D.

Table 3: Frequency of SPM Grades

Grades	Frequency	Percentage
D	30	10
C	22	7
B or C+	85	28
A-or B+	100	33
A+ or A	63	21

Comparing the two English performance, it seems that the students manage to get better scores in SPM rather than MUET. Whilst around 54 percent of the students managed to get B+ and above in SPM, only 31 percent got Band 4 or 5.

Perceived Proficiency

Table 4 presents the self-rated score of respondents' English proficiency. In general, the distribution of self-rated score is more similar to SPM grades rather than MUET scores. About 4 percent of the respondents (11) believed that their English is excellent, 41 percent (122) believed that their English is good, 52 percent (156) believed that their overall English proficiency is at average and 4 percent (11) rated their English as poor.

Table 4: Self-rated English PROFICIENCY

Rated	Frequency	Percentage
Poor	11	4
Average	156	52
Good	122	41
Excellent	11	4

Meanwhile, for the rating concerning the difficulties in the English skills, most of the respondents believed that reading is not an issue for them but many face problems in speaking. For difficulties in writing, 16 percent of the respondents (47) indicated as 'always', 23 percent (70) 'often' have difficulties, 59 percent (178) indicated 'sometimes' and 5 students 'never' have difficulties in writing. On the other hand, for difficulties in reading, only 3 percent (10) rated 'always', 11 percent (32) rated 'often', 69 percent (208) rated 'sometimes' and 17 percent (50) rated 'never' on the difficulties in readings. Meanwhile, for difficulties in listening, 6

percent of the respondents (17) indicated 'always', 20 percent (60) 'often' have difficulties, 63 percent (190) indicated 'sometimes' and 11 percent (33) 'never' had any problem in listening in English. Related to difficulties in speaking, 16 percent of the respondents (47) indicated 'always', 25 percent (74) 'often', 54 percent (162) 'sometimes' face difficulties and 5 percent 'never' had any difficulties in speaking English.

Table 5: Self-rated Difficulties in English

Rated	Frequency	Percentage
Writing		
Always	47	16
Often	70	23
Sometimes	178	59
Never	5	2
Reading		
Always	10	3
Often	32	11
Sometimes	208	69
Never	50	17
Listening		
Always	17	6
Often	60	20
Sometimes	190	63
Never	33	11
Speaking		
Always	47	16
Often	74	25
Sometimes	162	54
Never	17	5

OLS Regression

To examine the relationship between English proficiency and CGPA, a linear regression analysis was conducted, whereby CGPA as the dependent variable, while MUET result, SPM English result, self-perceived of proficiency and the difficulties in reading, listening, speaking and writing are the independent variables. Results indicated that the overall model is significant with an adjusted R-squared of 0.085, which indicated that the model accounted for almost 9 percent of the variance in CGPA. Table 6 summarizes the regression result.

Table 6: OLS Regression Results

Variables	Standardized coefficients beta	t	Sig.
SPM	0.115	1.611	0.108
MUET	0.264	3.765	0.001
SELF	-0.006	-0.907	0.923
WRITING	-0.025	-0.351	0.726
READING	-0.022	-0.307	0.759
LISTENING	-0.009	-0.131	0.896
SPEAKING	-0.030	-0.400	0.689

As expected, both variables, SPM and MUET are found to have positive relationship with CGPA. However, only MUET has a significant relationship with CGPA (at a 1-percent significance level), while SPM is only marginally significant. This implies that English proficiency has a positive effect on students' academic performance in the university. However, the perceived proficiency and difficulties in writing, reading, listening and speaking are all found to be insignificant and negatively related to CGPA.

Conclusion

English is recognised as a second language in Malaysia and is taught as a compulsory subject in all the schools. Most Malaysian universities use English as their main medium of learning, both in private and public universities. Hence, it is vital for students to be proficient in English once they enrol themselves in the university because proficiency in English will enable them to better understand the subject, especially Business-related subjects. In addition to that, it also helps them in conducting presentations and completing assessments. By using the OLS regression analysis from the survey of 300 business students in four public universities, the analysis show that English proficiency is related to a student's academic performance in the university. Both, SPM and MUET results are found to be positively related to the CGPA of the respondents. The finding suggests the importance of English proficiency for students to excel academically at the university level. On the other hand, perceived proficiency is found to be unrelated to the academic performance. However, this study was not able to distinguish which skills is the most important skill needed for students to achieve better academic performance. All the language skills i.e., writing, reading, listening and speaking are found to be unrelated to academic performance. The use of students' perception on their skills is insufficient to conclude such findings, and perhaps future studies can be done to examine the MUET scores for the four different skills available. Whilst this study only focuses on the business students and public universities, future studies should also explore other fields of study and private universities.

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